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SUBJECT: FLOODS RAVAGE MOROCCO'S NORTH, BUT AGRICULTURE
LIKELY SPARED

REF: RABAT 119

¶1. (U) Summary. Early and sustained rains have recharged reservoirs and raised hopes of good 2009 harvests. The rosy agricultural output projections are one of the few bright spots in Morocco's 2009 GDP growth outlook. The unusually high level of precipitation has caused flood damage in parts of the Kingdom, and analysts are beginning to warn of danger to the 2009 harvest if the heavy rains continue. Current damage, however, is unlikely to substantially impact a good grain harvest. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Moroccans uniformly welcomed the early and heavy rains that have darkened skies across the Kingdom all winter following a decade of below-normal rainfall and droughts. Cumulative rainfall from September to January totalled 372 mm, about four times the level of the prior year. Aquifers and reservoirs have benefitted from the rain, with reservoirs at an average of 68 percent capacity compared to 46 percent one year previously. The early rain has led Government of Morocco (GOM) forecasters to project agricultural growth of 22 percent in 2009, making it the star performer in Morocco's GDP outlook (Reftel). (Note: The agricultural sector accounts for nearly 15 percent of GDP. End Note.)

¶3. (U) A ten day span of heavy rain beginning at the end of January was nevertheless too much for some regions of Morocco. In northwestern regions, reservoirs have reached maximum capacity, forcing dams to open floodgates. The resulting river flooding has killed at least two dozen people, displaced over 5,000 others, destroyed hundreds of homes, and submerged nearly 200 factories. In the Gharb region of the northern Atlantic coast, one of Morocco's agricultural breadbaskets, authorities estimate that 80,000 hectares of farmland have been flooded (nearly 20 percent of the region's cultivated land), of which 15,000 hectares have been considered definitively lost for production. However, the total flooded land remains a small fraction of Morocco's five million hectares of cultivated land. The Ministry of Agriculture had created a USD 12 million fund to respond to flood damages in agriculture (principally to repair damaged irrigation waterworks and compensate flooded farmers) in response to episodes of heavy rain in December, but has not announced further actions following the more recent flooding.

¶4. (U) On a February 4-6 visit to mountainous areas of the Middle Atlas region of Morocco, Poloff noted rain and snowfall effects ranging from flooded fields and road damage to completely impassable routes. The rains have provided ample fodder for livestock, but have also made harvest from vegetable fields difficult or impossible, resulting in local scarcity and elevated prices of produce. Inhabitants informed Poloff that the rains had been generally good for the local water table, but the flooding had in many cases caused contamination of drinking water from silt or

overflowing sewage.

Comment: Here Comes the Sun

¶5. (SBU) FAS contacts in the Ministry of Agriculture remain reluctant to make any predictions of the impact of the flooding on 2009 agricultural output. However, Post estimates that the limited flooding thus far will not significantly degrade the total grain harvest, along with its important contribution to GDP. The sun is shining again across Morocco, and forecasts call for more moderate weather for the rest of the month. (Note. The rainy season in Northern Morocco typically extends through March or April).

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